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ABSTRACT

A program in which mentally retarded persons are trained to tutor their peers is described. Considered are selection and training aspects of such a program, and emphasized is the importance of the relationship between tutor and student. Tutors are explained to learn principles of establishing specific plans and keeping basic records. (CL)

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A Training Model for Peer Tutoring with Mentally Retarded Individuals

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Introduction

A potential but underutilized means to assist with the learning and vocational skills of mentally retarded individuals is through the use of peers. Institutions are realizing that there are special advantages to tutoring programs conducted by target population peers:

1. Helping behaviors may be viewed with greater acceptance due to the peer's prior experience with the problem.
2. An immediate rapport is more likely to take place due to membership in a similar age and social position, i. e., "non-authority."
3. The threat of administrative retribution is mitigated.
4. Peers, because they circulate within the social milieu, have the advantage of being "on the spot" during crucial moments for providing instruction when a problem develops.
5. Helping others frequently engenders an improved attitude toward the institution.
6. The process of tutor training not only affects the tutor in his tutor/tutoree relationship but affects the tutor's self-esteem and socialization.

At most institutions clients are provided training by the professional staff. However, staffing is often limited and therefore the time allowed per individual instruction is small. Usually this approach best serves those clients who are motivated to seek help and are interested in being involved in activities. This leaves three populations of clients who are not being served as well as they could be served: (1) those who have potential for increased skill acquisition but are not motivated to seek assistance in developing the same, (2) those who are having problems in

certain skills but do not seek help, and (3) those who are having problems but because of limited staffing are not receiving as much help as would be desirable.

There appears to be a need to reach these three populations by some means. This paper outlines a program of peer tutoring which can fill this need and also has the added benefit of fostering self-help.

Implications of the Tutoring Program

Generally, mentally retarded individuals do not have many opportunities either in the institutional setting or in the community to interact in a responsible and helpful way. Typically, they are the recipients of help rather than the givers of help. What is gained by their involvement in a tutoring program is a sense of useful participation which is often lacking in their lives. Therefore, the assumption is made that tutoring can make important contributions to the socialization and self-esteem of the mentally handicapped and provides a useful psychological consequence as well as a learning/vocational impact.

The personal growth of tutors when assuming a teacher's role requires examination. Perceived elements that constitute the role of a teacher include responsibility, status, and respect from others. The enactment of the role of a teacher would tend to increase self-esteem and generate greater positive attitudes towards others and the institution with which the mentally retarded individual is associated. It is assumed that, when a mentally retarded individual is placed in the tutor role, he or she discovers that one must live up to the expectations of the teacher role. The key element in this process is the characteristic of helping another person.

What is being advocated is the training of all mentally retarded individuals to be tutors since each may derive a number of outcomes that contribute toward more positive social behavior both in and out of the institutional setting. However, the use of clients without careful training, simply because of their experiences and role as peers, is recognized as naive and dangerous.

Training is essential if a tutoring program is to be successful. Harrison (1976) reported that tutors who have been exposed to training perform better than those who enter tutoring unprepared. To assume that a tutor will automatically be effective would be a mistake. There are a number of studies that indicate differences in the teaching behavior of children as a function of their social class and ethnic background. Freshbach (1976) reported that middle-class white children use a greater number of positive reinforcements during teaching than do lower-class white children and middle- and lower-class black children. The reinforcement style of children appears to be modeled after their parents. Training in tutoring behavior modifies teaching styles.

The primary goal of the training program is to prepare the tutor to work effectively with other mentally retarded individuals who are having difficulty in acquiring skills or learning new skills. This involves a training program for tutors that includes (1) personal social growth, (2) acquiring teaching skills usable in a variety of specific skill areas --it is recognized that many tutors may tutor in only one skill area, (3) training in record keeping--the practicability of emphasizing this skill during tutoring will vary with the tutor's level of functioning, and (4) comprehension of the program format.

In establishing a training program, it is recognized that the tutor will encounter tutorees with different personalities, requiring instruction in specific skills. Accordingly, the tutor has to be trained to be alert for personality differences and to be comfortable and communicative in working with the same. It is not expected or intended that the tutors have the theoretical foundations or technical knowledge to provide intensive instruction in specific skills. The position in this paper corresponds with the attitude of Sarbin (1976), who reported: "The stress on skill acquisition for the tutor, I believe, is a misplaced emphasis. Skill acquisition is secondary to the development of a role relationship that portrays the features of friendship and makes possible the activation of skills." (p. 37). To achieve this goal, training is essential.

Selection of Tutors

Participants in the tutoring program should be on a volunteer basis, but everyone should be encouraged to take part. Greatest participation can be achieved by discussing individual reasons for resistance and attempting to resolve barriers that more than likely may be personal. There should be no criteria of possessing specific skills as a prerequisite to training. The intent is to have all individuals participate in training since everyone possesses some unique qualities and the training program serves as a refinement of tnese qualities as opposed to a major alteration of the same. Training will foster everyone's personal social growth. Yet, it is recognized that, to participate in training, individuals will need a sufficient level of social maturity and linguistic competence to permit expression and the ability to assess positive and negative reinforcement. The criteria of an individual's

functioning adequately for participation in training will depend on the professional staff's evaluation of the individual's past performance. However, every effort should be made to include everyone because the training itself is helpful to the development of the individual.

Once tutor training participants are determined, interviews should be arranged for each with a group of two or three current tutors and a professional staff member. The interview is considered to be important in establishing a constructive task-oriented tenor and a rational attitude toward training and the program.

Training Program

The content of the training program is broadly defined to include three phases: (1) communication and group skills, (2) Tutor Effectiveness Format model, and (3) policies, procedures, and record system. The basic format for the training program is six to twelve meetings, each being 30 to 50 minutes in duration, with two meetings conducted per day.

Phase one of training begins with awareness exercises intended to build rapport and develop communication and group skills as well as serving as an introduction to the training program. Usually any standard type of introduction exercises appropriately geared to the population of trainees can be used, e. g., listening games, a game of who's who, and getting-acquainted triads (Pfeiffer and Jones, 1970, 1972; Miller, 1973). These activities usually last for one and one-half hours (two meetings).

The second phase of training introduces the Tutor Effectiveness Format (TEF) model. The model gives the trainees guidelines within which they can use specific skills. The use of the TEF model emphasizes four steps in

tutoring. The first step is "tuning in" to the feelings of the learner and establishing a relationship. This involves establishing eye contact, the reflection of feeling, and listening skills. The second step is focusing on the problem and involves developing an awareness of the problem and establishing immediate goals. The tutor learns some specific exchanges to use such as "Can you tell me what's going on?" and "How are you getting along?" Step three is "contracting" or establishing specific plan and practice. This is the part of intervention where the tutor demonstrates the specific skill and provides practice for the tutoree. The final step is "follow-up" or assessing if the skills have been mastered. With this step, the tutor reviews the progress of the tutoree and, if needed, seeks the involvement of others.

After the TEF model is explained and diagrammed for the trainees to insure understanding, skill in using the model is gained through role play; structured role playing should be used. The basic assumption is that it is not sufficient simply to tell tutors how to react. They need practice and feedback when they are involved in role-playing situations. Explanation of the TEF model and role playing requires four to eight sessions. During role plays the trainers stress basic tutoring skills to include clarifying the task, verbal praise, and avoiding punishment. A basic goal in the TEF training is to have the tutors assume a role conducive for tutoree learning. The enactment of role playing assists in producing modifications in perceptions, attitudes, and overt behavior of the trainees. The end result, hopefully, is a change of behavior consistent with offering positive reinforcements. Reinforcement is crucial in the learning process for increasing motivation and effecting cognitive changes. The training program should

provide the trainee the opportunity to work with simulated learning problems. To achieve optimum transfer, role plays should be carefully planned in advance of training.

Not an integral goal of the use of role plays, but of benefit, is training prospective tutorees appropriate behavior. It is anticipated that the trainees will also be recipients of the tutoring program. Accordingly, role enactment as a learner will increase the mentally handicapped individual's cooperation with his/her own learning problems.

The policies, procedures, and record system phase of training is covered in a single session. The importance of the tutor's role, the tutor's limitations, and how to seek help are emphasized. During this session tutor effectivenss can be assisted by providing tutors with appropriate symbolic clues for role enactment. Such things as a portfolio for keeping materials and any record-keeping paraphenalia appropriate to the ability group of the volunteers should be provided.

The actual tutoring may consist of 3 or 4 sessions, each 30 to 40 minutes long. Minimum records for each tutoring session should be the recording of each session in a log book. Any use of notes, etc., may be included. One aspect of the tutor-tutoree role to avoid is that of requiring tutors to evaluate others. The power to influence the outcomes for another person can become debilitating.

Absent from the training program is the development of specific skills. The intent is that a tutor will be assigned according to a skill that he or she already possesses but a tutoree needs to learn. Tutors should have had prior success with the skills they are teaching. Assignments may vary depending on the population served by the institution, but each assignment needs to be mutually agreeable to the participants. Suggested assignments include higher functioning mentally retarded individuals.

Inservice Training

Inservice training should be required to refine a tutor's specific skills and to further develop practical skills in teaching. Inservice training is an extension of the initial training and is held once a week. The structure of inservice training combines lectures, discussions, films, and/or demonstrations. The weekly sessions are conducted by the professional staff and visiting professionals. These meetings also serve as a time to discuss problems and answer questions concerning tutoring and to provide reinforcement to the tutors which is crucial for maintaining motivation. It also serves to focus on the assessment of progress made by each tutoree; thus evaluation of skill acquisition through tutoring lower functioning individuals using mentally ill clients who are lower functioning to tutor, and cross-age tutoring.

It must be recognized that a successful tutoring program requires the professional staff to (1) specify expected outcomes (diagnostic pretest), (2) do periodic assessment of the tutorees' progress, (3) coordinate the instructional materials, and (4) review the tutor's performance.

Summary

There are certain concepts concerning a tutoring program for mentally retarded individuals that should be avoided by anyone intent on establishing a similar approach. These include: (1) developing the tutoring program to the extent that it becomes an academic program beyond the cognitive skills of mentally retarded individuals, a professional program in disguise without benefit to the process of socialization and self-esteem of the tutors; (2) viewing the training of tutors as solely making them eligible to assume the menial task of professionals; and (3) allowing the tutors to serve as a replacement for professional staff.

The establishment of a peer-tutoring program for mentally retarded individuals by an agency or institution can serve as an effective method to assist with their learning and vocational skill development. The educational, social, and economic benefits of a tutoring program justify the administrative support necessary for training and inservice work to conduct an effective program. The responsibility of teaching skills to the mentally retarded should not be reserved solely for the professional staff but be viewed as involving both clients and professional staff.

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